

RPG Reload File 038 – ‘Battleheart’

[May 14, 2015](#) by [Shaun Musgrave](#)



Hello, gentle readers, and welcome to the **RPG Reload**, the weekly feature where the healer never heals quite as fast as we'd like. Each week, we take a look at an RPG from the swirling mists of time to see if it can survive in our enlightened future society. It's a chance for some revisiting, reflecting, and going in different directions than a regular review typically allows. I'm your host on this little tour, and while I choose the course most of the time, this isn't just my bus to steer. Once a month, I put the choice to you, the reader, to select the game I'll be playing. Simply comment below, post in the [Official RPG Reload Club thread](#) in the forums, or tweet me at [@RPGReload](#) with your choice, and you might just get to see me give it some time and a whole lot of words. Now that's something everyone can enjoy!



We're well into May now, and with the weather warming up after a particularly brutal winter, I'm sure many of us are taking some time to enjoy the great outdoors. When I was a kid, that meant no video games, but we live in the future world of 2015, so we can go outside *and* play video games at the same time. Take *that*, Mom! Still, the outdoors aren't always the best place to curl up for huge, sprawling epics that require our full attention for tons of hours at a time. There are stupid bees and ants everywhere, just waiting to feast on your tender flesh if you remain idle too long. We need something that scratches that itch for adventure and treasure that we can put away quickly when we have to run away from an approaching insect army. Luckily, whatever your needs may be, there's an RPG for that. So for the rest of this month, I've decided to focus the **RPG Reload** on lighter RPGs. These are adventures you can pick up and play for a few minutes whether you're camping in the woods, taking a break in the park, or battling Chernabog atop Bald Mountain with the fate of the world at stake. The first one I've picked out is Mika Mobile's wonderful *Battleheart* ([\\$2.99](#)).

Like most light RPGs, *Battleheart* focuses on one particular element of the genre. In this case, it's the battles. The game is essentially a series of battles with only the barest amount of context between them. I always find this kind of approach interesting because in a full RPG, battles not only need to be tactically satisfying and exciting, but they also have to resolve somewhat quickly. The longer you keep the player away from navigating a dungeon, the more likely they are to forget where they were going or what they were doing. Games that toss away exploration in favor of pure combat have the freedom to make battles run a lot longer, and the results of that freedom are sometimes pretty cool. It's more or less the basis of strategy RPG video games like *Fire Emblem* or *Final Fantasy Tactics* ([\\$13.99](#)), and harkens back to the strategy board games where this whole RPG mess started from.



Battleheart doesn't offer quite the same tactical depth as those games, but its battles are considerably more involved than those found in the average RPG. Its real strengths are in its intuitive controls and sublime balance. There are many characters from which you draw your party of four, and pretty much any combination can be equally viable. Its ability system is also very well thought-out, adding even more fun options to the fights. Between its real-time battles and relatively high difficulty, you need to have a certain level of manual dexterity to succeed at *Battleheart*. But more than that, you need to have a good sense of strategy and the ability to adapt your plans on the fly to account for the unexpected. The boss encounters in particular have some interesting curve balls to throw at you, and should the unthinkable happen and one member of your team goes down during a fight, every facet of your plans will likely need to be reorganized.

The game was released in early 2011 for iOS to instant acclaim from most sources. The developer, Mika Mobile, had built up a reputation for quality with their 2009 hit *Zombieville USA* ([\\$0.99](#)), so they didn't have to work quite so hard to get people on-board with *Battleheart*. Mika Mobile is a rare case of a developer who started with smartphone development, have more

or less stayed there, and have had pretty good success with just a handful of paid apps. Their latest release was a follow-up to this game, a sort of spin-off named *Battleheart Legacy* ([\\$4.99](#)) that has slightly more of a traditional bent to it. Outside of the *Battleheart* games, Mika Mobile's library consists entirely of action games, so it's not all that surprising that both this game and its sequel/spin-off are also fairly action-packed games. They also show a strong sense of the way most people tend to game on the platform, offering up short bursts of gameplay with extra mechanics to tie all of those sessions together.



In total, *Battleheart* offers up 33 stages, with three endless arenas providing extra replay value once you've finished up the main course. Among those stages are five boss encounters, each one offering up a unique challenge of some sort. For example, an early slime boss has you battling a giant ooze that breaks apart into smaller ones when its life bar is depleted. The smaller creatures will try to reform the big ooze, and the only way to finish him for good is to take down all of his smaller bits. Interestingly, the bosses are generally easier to handle than the regular stages, and it has to do with where the real challenge of *Battleheart* comes from. In regular stages, the

enemies come in preset waves, but they won't necessarily wait for you to finish off every baddie from the last wave before sending some of the next ones in. Your party can only have four members in it, and unless you're insane, one of them will be a healer of some sort that can't take much damage. That means you have to use three characters to make sure none of the enemies slip past to kill your healer. This is fine and dandy when the game limits the wave to three monsters, a courtesy it doesn't extend for very long.

While your attention might be on your healer, you also need to keep track of everyone else. Getting caught up on any one portion of the battlefield is a bad idea in this game, because it really doesn't take long for things to go south. While you can survive stages without your full group, it's quite a bit more difficult to do so. Even worse, any fallen members won't receive experience points even if you do squeak it out without them. If someone keeps on dying before the end of the battle, they'll get caught in a terrible cycle, something you'll want to avoid at all costs. It's hard to keep an eye on four different screen locations at once, but if you bunch your characters together it's both harder to control them and harder to deal with ranged attackers. Plus, you'll want to be making constant use of each character's special moves to take full advantage of their capabilities. It gets to a point where you feel like you're juggling chainsaws, and when you can finally do it without slicing your hand off, it's a great feeling.



For those less interested in dancing on the blade of a knife, the game does offer a couple of different ways to power yourself up if you get stuck. First, it's important to note that there's no penalty for failing a mission apart from lost time. You don't gain anything, either, but there's no harm in trying. You can always replay earlier missions to grind up more experience and gold, and the merchant's selection of items changes every time you come back from a battle, win or lose. You can also try swapping out a party member for someone different, though it can be time-consuming to get them up to speed with the rest of the group. The point is, you do have some options if you run into a situation you can't deal with in your current state.

Among those options is the selection of your special abilities. Each fifth level gained will unlock a new set of abilities for your characters to use in battle. You can only use one from each set, but you can change it at no cost between fights. This allows you to create a variety of builds for each character and shape your party to fit the situation. Each ability has an associated cooldown timer, but you'll be able to pop even the longest one a few times during each battle. I'd go so far as to say that the key factor to success in *Battleheart* is in choosing and using the right set of skills

judiciously. This flexibility in building your characters is one of the more important contributions to the game's excellent balance among its many characters.



You'll start off with two different characters at your disposal. One is an ever-important healer, and the other a knight. As you progress, you'll be able to use your gold to hire more characters at the local pub. In total, there are 14 different characters representing 10 different job classes. You'll probably need either the cleric or the suspiciously familiar bard in your group to stay on top of healing, but beyond that, it's up to you. Do you want a ranged attacker like a wizard or a ranger? Would you prefer to take another meatshield in to stave off the approaching hordes? Or perhaps you'd like to bring in two healers and two heavy damage-dealers and just go to town? You can set up your party however you like, and as long as you play your special abilities right, you'll find your team can win. It's fun to play around with different builds, though I suspect most people will just find four characters they like and ride them all the way to the end, which is also fine.

Each battle you win rewards you with experience, gold, and a random piece

of gear. Gear comes in a variety of types, but only the accessories are universal, so if you're sticking with one team, you'll probably end up selling more than you keep. While the shop appears to be random, the items it offers appear to steadily get better the farther into the game you get. Grabbing the best weapon and armor you can find for each character is a given, but the accessories offer up some interesting choices. Each character can only equip two accessories, but there are plenty of great benefits scattered among the many pieces. There are simple stat bonuses, multipliers for the gold you collect, haste effects, regeneration, and many more. Since you can never count on when any given piece of equipment might show up for sale again, it's wise to keep some gold on hand at all times. If you have to go out and get more, you've likely already lost the item. I kind of like this system because it makes it exciting to check the shop every time you're back. Even a plain old weapon upgrade can be thrilling when you haven't seen it show up in the shop before.



Battleheart does a great job of cutting down to the core of what makes job systems and planning RPG parties so much fun. It gives you a bunch of toys to choose from, tells you that you can only pick this many, and then throws

tough situations at you where you have to make your selections work somehow. If you can't make a go of it, the game doesn't punish you for your creativity and allows you to juggle things around as need be. I think it's clever that even though this is a relatively frantic real-time game, the same standard RPG rules of party-building apply. The battles are like a feverish action take on classic turn-based fantasy RPGs. This kind of set-up is likely pretty familiar to MMORPG players, and it's pretty neat to see it pared down to a small-scale pocket game.

The interface is incredibly intuitive, which is important in so far as it enables the game to really cut loose with its demands on you. All you have to do is draw lines with your finger. Make a line from a character to an empty space to move them there, or to another character to target them. Tapping on a character displays the icons for their special abilities, and tapping on those icons fires them off. My only big criticism of the system is that it's kind of tricky to choose the character you want when they all get jumbled up near each other. Even though *Battleheart's* basic concept and its controls have been frequently borrowed by games that followed, I've only seen one or two actually attempt to solve this problem. *Team Monster* ([Free](#)), a sadly abandoned social RPG published by Mobage, placed icons for each of your party members at the top of the screen. You could draw a line from the character themselves to their targets, or you could draw the line from the icon. If Mika Mobile ever revisits this particular concept, I hope they aren't too proud to borrow that right back. I think it's probably okay from an ethics point of view.



Lined front to back, *Battleheart* provides somewhere in the vicinity of three or four hours of play on a single run-through. There's a good bit of replay value in the game if you get into trying out different parties and abilities the way I do, and even more so if you start challenging the battle arenas. Even without all that stuff, though, the game provides more than enough in-the-moment enjoyment to be worth a regular spot on my iPhone. Its last update was in October of 2012 when support was added for the iPhone 5 family's larger screen, and the last content/balance patch for the game was around four years ago back in July 2011 when Heleth and Oakley were added to the game. Unless something breaks, I imagine this won't see too many updates in the future, but who knows? I think the important thing is that it still works fine on modern devices, though I couldn't test it with an iPhone 6 so I'm not sure how it deals with the bigger screens. Can someone help me out in the comments?

That's more or less all I've got to say about *Battleheart*. It's a nice, fast-paced game that is perfect to fire up when you've got a few minutes to spare and not much more. And hey, its bold, clear visuals are really easy to see even in direct sunlight, making it a great choice to play outdoors. That's just

my take on the game, however. What do you fine readers think? I want to know, so please leave your thoughts in the comments below, in the [Official RPG Reload Club thread](#) in the forums, or on Twitter via the [@RPGReload](#) account. Don't forget to vote for the next reader's choice while you're at it! As for me, I'll be back next week with another RPG from the archives. Thanks for reading!

Next Week's Reload Hint: *Everything is better with ninjas.*